

What's New in New Media

Or

What's 'New' in New Media?

An overview of the trends shaping new media today and tomorrow

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Preamble

This is not my talk. It is a paper which discusses the issues and which will be used as the basis for a presentation, during which I will make many of the same points and deal with much of the same material. If you have attended the presentation - or watched it online - then you will see that some points get more attention there than they do here, largely because ideas often occur to me while I'm speaking. If you read this first and then watch the presentation you will see that I'm following the same train of thought, but without a script as such.

Where the two contradict each other I leave it to you, gentle reader, to determine which is more plausible or well-argued. Or which fits most snugly with your own ideas and speculations.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow

Welcome to tomorrow.

The seismic shift has begun, and we are in the middle of the earthquake, when all that is solid shifts and moves, the old certainties no longer hold and our fixed ideas come crashing down around us.

It started in 2000 with the first crash, when the attempts to rewrite the rules of finance were shown to be a poor delusion. That early shock was only the precursor. In 2006 we are feeling the real shockwave as the tectonic plates move beneath us, pulling so much that we thought was permanent under the subduction zone and building a new continent before our eyes.

By the end of 2008 we will only have the aftershock of the second dotcom crash to worry about, as Google brings down the shutters and wonders why it didn't get out of search before it was too late and the last MySpace user deletes their profile and moves on.

It is as Marx predicted. Over the past quarter-century the entire basis of the global economy has moved from banks to bits, and reliance on communications networks and computer systems has become absolute. The base on which we have built our political, cultural, religious and family structures has been

completely changed. It is no surprise, surely, that the superstructure is changing too. Even if you are not an economic determinist you can see that when one facet of our richly interdependent world changes completely it will have an impact elsewhere.

What does this mean for media companies in the new world?

What role was there for scriptoria and monkish calligraphy after Gutenberg?

What role is there for printers of accounting stationery in the age of ecommerce?

What do hatters and hatblock makers do when fashion changes?

No form of business, not even the mightiest company or the most philanthropic publicly funded corporation, has any right to existence. This isn't about capitalism or socialism, it is about the evolutionary model of human existence. It is one of the many insights of the evolutionary biologists that we can reasonably apply to other domains, whether cultural production or manufacturing industry.

The economist Joseph Schumpeter identified 'creative destruction' as a consequence of innovation in manufacturing and production, but his insight applies just as well to innovations in creative production - who makes film cameras for domestic use these days? - and distribution.

One of the lessons we can learn from this model is that incumbents find it hard to innovate, because any disruptive innovation will be perceived as a threat to existing business practices and current levels of profitability. As a result the innovations which would transform the way an organisation operates will generally be rejected, left for new entrants to adopt. This implies that where an incumbent is capable of innovating then it should not abandon the more successful developments and leave them to the competition to turn from prototypes into services.

For example, it could be argued that the work done by the BBC on the Creative Archive and the underlying license will be of great benefit to the other partners - most notably ITN - while the BBC itself has suspended its activities in order to put the archive through a 'public value test'.

Creative media

In the media world there is much talk of 'citizen journalism', 'participative media', 'the former audience' and other terms seeking to describe the reshaping of the relationship between the creator and consumer of content at all levels.

It is sometimes called a process of 'democratising media' but this doesn't seem the right way to think about it. Democracy is about power and representation, not merely about having a voice. It is also about the tyranny of the majority

and the moral pressure on the winners in any vote or decision to take into account the needs and desires of the whole *polis* rather than just their side.

This is not, in itself, about democracy but about plurality. We are living through a Cambrian explosion in new media forms and voices, the online equivalent of that amazing period 540 million years ago when the fossil record shows the sudden - geologically speaking - appearance of many of the ancestors of modern species.

We should remember that the Cambrian was a period of great experimentation in structure and function, but that there is good evidence that many promising models simply died out, leaving the world to our ancestors¹. There is no good reason to suppose that these forms of life were, in themselves, unable to be sustained if conditions - chemical, physical - had been different or if they had simply been luckier.

So it is today. Experiments are being tried all over the net. Some will succeed and shape the future of media. Some will fail. Those that start to succeed may well shape the environment and make it more likely that others will fail, just as YouTube's success has polluted the ecosystem and shrunk the niche for other video-sharing sites.

Web 2.0 and the new world

While we talk about change, the future has already arrived. It's just not evenly distributed². The future has arrived because the technologies that will shape our world in five or even ten years time have probably been invented already, and may well be inching their way out of the labs and into the hands of bleeding-edge ultra-early adopters.

For many organisations the future is tagged 'Web 2.0' and it marks a clear shift away from Web-based publishing and one-way channels of communication into a more interactive, two-way, service based world.

There are many Web 2.0 sites and services already available, and many enterprises are using them to good effect. Large numbers of startup companies are desperate for a mention on blogs like TechCrunch so that they come to the attention of the increasing proportion of venture capital companies willing to invest.

Microsoft is in the middle of a programme, lead by its new chief software architect Ray Ozzie, to re-engineer the company around online delivery of services in ways that it hope will complement and support locally installed software on a Windows platform.

¹ See Simon Conway Morris, *The Crucible of Creation: The Burgess Shale and the Rise of Animals*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998

² The aphorism comes from SF writer William Gibson, and I use it far too often.

Intel has recently announced *SuiteTwo*, a suite of 'Enterprise 2.0' software for companies that includes blogging software (Typepad), a wiki (Socialtext), and RSS feed software (Simplefeed and Newsgator).

And you can hardly open a paper without reading about the new breed of website, from the explosive growth of user-generated content on Wikipedia to the dangers facing our children on social network sites like MySpace.

This is clearly a bandwagon, but it may well be one that has serious implications for the way your business operates. Something's going on, and it's important that you know what it is.

What is Web 2.0 about?

The generic term may be 'Web 2.0', but it is impossible to pin that media-friendly appellation down into anything as specific or useful as a set of technologies or even a specific type of website. Any term that can be applied with equal utility to Google Maps, YouTube, Flickr, Jumpcut, Writely, JotSpot, Yahoo! Mail and Wikipedia clearly has a rather loose definition.

We may even begin to suspect that it has more to do with marketing and the attempt to persuade venture capital companies to read business plans than anything concrete or remotely applicable to your business, but while it is true that there are lots of people out there happy to call any remotely interactive or participative online site or service 'Web 2.0', that doesn't mean there is nothing beneath the sales hype and startup exaggeration.

It is useful to take a historical perspective here. If we look at the way information and communications technologies and new models propagate within businesses then we typically observe three stages. First, there is the stage where the new technologies are used to automate or facilitate old practices. Old inputs and outputs are retained but they are plugged into the new system.

Next there is some rethinking and processes are designed to make the best use of the new system. However since the systems were themselves designed around the organisation's business processes the potential for radical change is limited.

Then comes the final stage, where new systems or processes are introduced, based not on the capabilities of the stage one system but on what the technologies can do - their 'affordances'. At this stage the enterprise is as dependent on the technology as an organ is on the nutrients delivered in the blood.

If you took away the telephone from a company in the 1930's then it would have been inconvenient. Do the same in the 1970's and the enterprise would be in crisis. Of course today you could probably do without phones entirely, because even core technologies have their day. What's Google's phone number? Or Flickr's?

One of the most important implications of this model is that it shows that it takes a long time and a willingness to innovate before technologies are adopted.

Consider accounting systems.

In the first stage core processes are automated but the inputs and outputs - paper invoices, cheques and remittances - are unchanged. Next, invoices may be accepted electronically but there are facilities for direct input and while some payments are made straight to bank accounts many are still done in a monthly cheque run.

At the final stage the accounts system is integrated into a complete organisational IT environment or CRM system based on SAP or ORACLE, all payments are processed through it and the organisation depends on it entirely.

At the moment many organisations are at stage two of this process when it comes to Internet-based technologies, especially email and Web-based tools. Corporate intranets support top-down structures, email is just a replacement for phone calls or memos rather than an integrated part of an information service, and challenging new approaches like blogs and instant messaging are treated with suspicion.

Web 2.0 marks the point at which enterprises are moving to the third stage. It is not, in itself, the end point - we are already seeing talk of Web 3.0 from the World Wide Web Consortium³ - but it does mean that the technologies are now well understood and widely available enough for it to be reasonable to start designing businesses around their affordances.

What does Web 2.0 offer?

We can analyse the impact of Web 2.0 on two levels. The first, and most basic, is that Web 2.0 tools turn a one-way medium into a two-way conversation, making the Web more dynamic. They are designed to make content creation simple and unproblematic, and to facilitate publication and the creation of connections between material. Blogs, wikis, media sites like Flickr for images or YouTube for video allow anyone with a modicum of skill to become part of the ongoing conversation, so long as they have access to the necessary technology and an Internet connection, of course. Tagging of content with arbitrary labels, crosslinks between posts and productions, and the ability to embed content from one site in another all work together to make the two-way web a rich hypermedium. Peer-based production means that anyone can contribute, and many do.

But that is not the end of it, because the existence of these tools allows something else to happen at the higher level. Once lots of people have access

³ As reported in the International Herald Tribune in May 2006.
<http://www.ihf.com/articles/2006/05/23/business/web.php>

to these tools then networks of interest and engagement emerge, social networks which may reflect real-world relationships but do not have to, networks which are far richer, deeper and more complex than the shared membership of mailing lists, newsgroups or discussion boards which characterised the first generation of 'virtual communities'.

I can be your friend at school, ADD you on MySpace, embed your videos in my blog and comment on your Flickr photos, trackback your blog posts and even message you from my mobile when you're in your virtual world.

The potential for Web 2.0 is enormous, although of course it will not be called Web 2.0 by the time we see the real change, because fashion demands that we have a new set of descriptive terms every five years or so just as the clothes shops have something different every season.

But we will see new forms of organisation emerge, forms which are designed from the ground up to make full use of the capabilities of the new generation of tools, which assume that the network is pervasive, that technology is ubiquitous and that collaboration can best be supported as part of a wider conversation. Some of these businesses will crash and burn, some of the experiments will fail, but there will be immense evolutionary pressure and we will quickly see better ways of doing business. It will then be up to the larger enterprises, those that have been in business long enough to remember the day before the Web and even before the Internet, to decide how they are going to adapt.

Web 2.0 and the BBC

Web 2.0 is a transitional stage, marking the point at which we get away from the page-oriented, stateless protocols which underpinned the first decade of the Web's growth and start thinking properly about services and distributed systems. If we get stuck in this 'dictatorship of the presentation layer' then we will find that it cannot support the rapid growth of the network to encompass the next five billion users, and that it cannot offer the social or economic benefits that we currently anticipate.

So if the BBC is going to go all Web 2.0 it needs to be more than just another makeover show for the Website or an attempt to turn the corporation into a MySpace clone inviting participation and user-generated content while shining up the interface with the liberal application of Ajax. Use the Web 2.0 bandwagon to move things forward, but use it in the way that a spacecraft uses Jupiter's gravity, to add some forward momentum to the project.

The Sighted Watchmaker

Earlier I described the parallels between today's media world and the Cambrian explosion when new species were being created with wild abandon. However there is one a major and significant difference between Darwinian evolution and what is happening in the media.

Evolution is blind. It lacks intelligence or foresight. An adaptation that is not useful now but will be in future is lost if those bearing it are not lucky, and even the most beautiful species will fade and be lost if the environment does not favour it.

But what is happening in the media is not blind, and the evolutionary process is not based on random variation and the survival of the fittest. It is closer to Lamarckian evolution, where characteristics developed in one generation can be passed to the next, and where the choices made by one generation can influence their descendants. We make choices, we see options, we anticipate the future and we can even decide to continue with the unpopular and the loss-making if we believe that it will eventually thrive. Or thrive once more.

The well-adapted will survive in this new new media world, but it is more than a matter of chance. Luck and learning both count.

All of us involved in the shaping of the media landscape, all of us trying to cope with the disruptive effects of the movements of the tectonic plates brought about by the network, should be watching carefully.

We need to observe the mistakes of others. Not all are their fault, and not all failures show paths that we should avoid. Indeed, some of the glorious failures may provide inspiration for tomorrow.

We also need to consider whether other people's successes were well deserved. When News Corporation bought InterMix Media MySpace was just one part of the deal, and Rupert Murdoch saw it as a way of driving traffic to Fox TV sites⁴ rather than as a destination or a property in its own right. He was luckier than he could imagine, and had the sense to abandon his plans to buy a search company in favour of persuading Google to amortise the costs of his original purchase.

Whenever we look at what others did, or analyse our own performance, we need to ask what really made the difference. Google's business plan was rubbish, their technology incapable of supporting the company they wanted to build, but they stumbled on pay-per-click advertising and realised that they had a way to drive eyeballs to sites just as ITV used to drive eyeballs to TV ads⁵. YouTube managed the process of transcoding all video to Flash well enough for uploading to be simple, unlike the Internet Archive or any of its commercial rivals, and was smart enough to make embedding in other sites easy while at the same time adding social features.

⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4695495.stm>

⁵ See John Battelle's *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture*

Who Are You?

The central question to ask, for every project, every area of activity, every offering, is this:

Is it a dinosaur or a crocodile?

Dinosaurs could not survive the changed environment. The species that did not evolve died out. Crocodiles remain unchanged, constant, able to survive, but they had to watch smaller, nimbler mammals come to dominate the world and change even the weather.